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The Presidential Election: Change Comes to America

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It is great
To do that thing that ends all other deeds;
Which shackles accidents and bolts up change
—William Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra,* V:2:4

The election of President Barack Obama was inevitable. Or maybe not. In the contest between the Democrat Obama, senator from Illinois, and the Republican John McCain, senator from Arizona, a Democratic victory had been predicted as historically certain.[1] After two Republican terms in the White House, the calendar called for a change of parties. Job ratings of the incumbent Republican president, George W. Bush, had plunged to record lows. Economic conditions were grim, the worst in twenty-five years: unemployment reached ten million, stocks lost 40 percent of their value, and the government scrambled to rescue a financial system nearing worldwide collapse. Given this, most political scientists foretold Obama's certain success.[2]

But many others regarded that prediction as farfetched. It seemed improbable that the United States would ever elect a black man as president, given its sad historical inheritance of slavery and racial discrimination. Social scientists "knew" that Americans still held racist views that would affect their votes,[3] and commentators "knew" that respondents to opinion polls were lying when they said they would mark their ballots for Obama. The evil heritage of racism, analysts wrote, meant that Democrats could win neither southern states[4] nor Latino votes in the West.[5] And, however bad economic conditions might be, gullible voters would eventually fall prey to manipulators of their social conservatism on issues such as abortion and gay marriage.[6]

These sentiments were reinforced by the apparent recent emergence of a Republican majority in the nation, defined by issues of race, religion, and national security.[7] This new dominant coalition would overwhelm the Democratic candidate. Obama was black, surely a fatal political flaw in a white and allegedly racist populace. He bore a Muslim name, but sought votes from a nation that had been attacked by Islamic terrorists. He had never served in the military and had limited experience in foreign affairs, in contrast to his opponent, a Vietnam War hero who had pointed the way to

a possible, if limited, "success" in the U.S. war in Iraq. If there truly were a new Republican majority in the country, McCain ought to win.

The presidential election of 2008 was an exhilarating contest, a display of innovative campaign techniques, a contest of two unusually qualified and admired candidates. After half a century (or more, by some reckonings),[8] neither an incumbent president nor an incumbent vice president would be on the ballot, providing open contests for both parties' nominations. It would be the nation's first Internet election, featuring new networking Web sites such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. Its historic results also tested competing theories of voter behavior.

So what happened?

The Election Results

In the real political world, Obama won a decisive victory over McCain. The Democrat's margin in the popular ballot count was nearly ten million (53.7 percent of the two-party vote), and he secured more than two-thirds of the electoral votes (365 to 173). He became only the second Democrat since Franklin Delano Roosevelt (along with Lyndon Johnson) to win a decisive majority of the national popular vote. And his victory margin outshone those of all but three of his party's nominees throughout American history, including Woodrow Wilson, Harry Truman, John Kennedy, and Bill Clinton. In the post–New Deal period, Obama also outperformed every first-term Republican winner except Dwight Eisenhower.

The election results evinced a decided shift in voter sentiment from the two previous contests. In 2000, Democrat Al Gore won a thin plurality of the popular vote, but Republican George W. Bush gained a bare margin of four votes in the Electoral College, after a favorable ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court. In 2004, Bush achieved reelection by gaining a slight lead in the national popular vote and by carrying the critical state of Ohio.

Obama's mandate in 2008, in contrast to these close matches, was decisive.[9] He increased the Democratic vote by ten million, a 17 percent increase over John Kerry's losing tally in 2004. McCain not only lost the election; he also lost votes, garnering two million fewer than Bush's previous tally (a 3 percent decline). These results can be explained by three factors: turnout, geography, and demography.

Turnout

The presidential election created great excitement, with nine-tenths of the electorate expressing marked interest. These feelings led more than 131 million Americans to cast ballots, a noticeable rise of some 9 million in the turnout numbers. Proportionate participation also increased from 2004, with 61.6 percent of eligible citizens casting votes in 2008, an increase of 1.5 percent from 2004.

Turnout varied considerably among the states. It increased by double digits in seven southern states, as well as Arizona, Colorado, Hawaii, Indiana, and Nevada, largely because of registration drives by the Obama campaign focused on African Americans and Latinos. In all of these states, the Democratic proportion of the vote also rose considerably, and seven of the twelve eventually fell into Obama's column. Turnout also dropped slightly in six noncompetitive states, where either Obama or McCain conceded the state in advance, reducing the stimulus to voter participation.

Expectations of high turnout had come from the large number of new registrants and the heavy participation in early and absentee voting before election day itself. More than thirty million ballots were cast before November 4, comprising at least a quarter of the total vote and representing an increase of at least five million early votes since 2004. In some states, the early voters comprised as much as three-fourths of the total vote in the previous election. By encouraging this heavy advance turnout, the Obama forces won significant victories in North Carolina, Colorado, and Nevada, all of which had voted for Bush in 2004.[10]

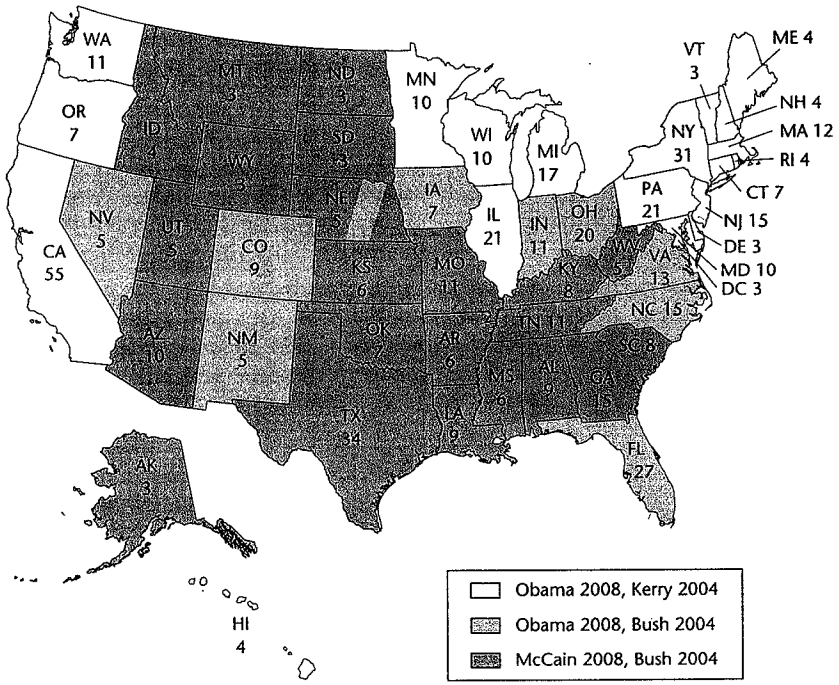
It is possible that some Republicans deliberately avoided the presidential balloting. Throughout the campaign, McCain supporters had shown less enthusiasm for their candidate, possibly keeping them at home. A leading student of turnout attributes their abstention largely to McCain's selection of Alaska governor Sarah Palin as the party's vice-presidential nominee. According to Curtis Gans, "By election time many culturally conservative Republicans still did not see him as one of their own and stayed home, while moderate Republicans saw the nomination of Palin as reckless and worried about McCain's steadiness."[11] Republican voters may also have been discouraged by the widespread pre-election predictions that Obama was certain to win.

Whatever the motivation, more self-identified Democrats participated in the balloting, outnumbering Republicans by 39 percent to 32 percent in exit polls. These partisan turnout rates marked considerable change from 2004, when the parties' ranks were essentially equal (36 percent Democrats, 37 percent Republicans). However, the turn toward the Democrats began as early as 2007, when a prominent academic study found that considerable erosion of Republican loyalties among both committed partisans and independents had given the Democrats an overall advantage in party identification of 50 percent to 36 percent.[12] The 2008 difference between Republican and Democratic turnout probably reflected longer-term changes in attitudes, rather than reactions to specific campaign events.

Geography

In winning the electoral vote, Barack Obama forged new paths across the states of the Union. In the two most recent contests, Democrats had restricted their efforts to electoral fortresses in the Northeast, Florida, parts

Figure 3-1 The Electoral Map of 2008

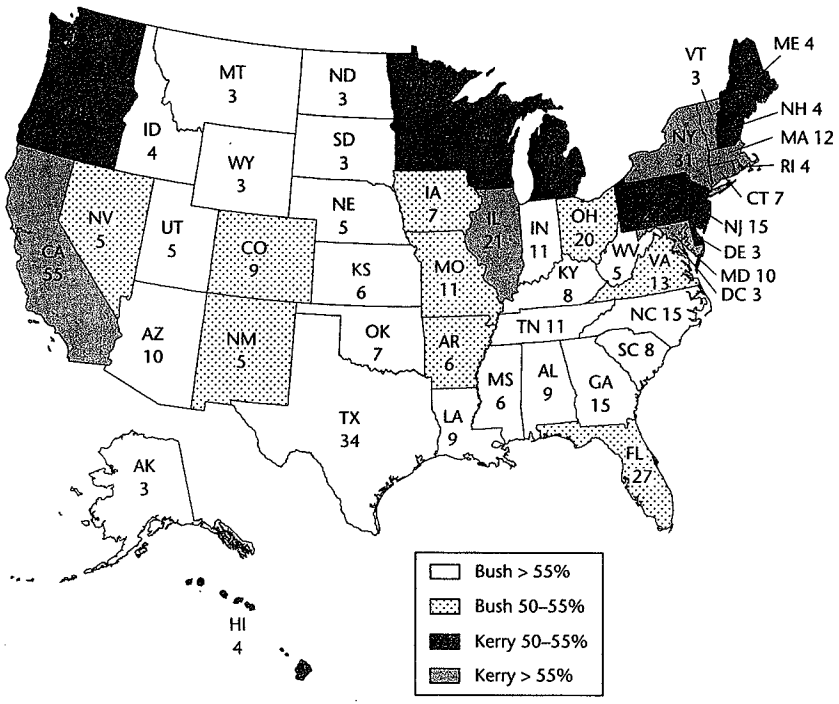


of the Midwest, and the Pacific Coast. In this minimalist strategy, winning the White House required victories in almost all of these states, neglecting wide swathes of the nation. Losing just one large targeted state—Florida in 2000 and Ohio in 2004—also meant losing in the national electoral count.

Obama changed the Democratic strategy, extending the contest to more states and to more areas, often Republican bailiwicks, within these states. A huge campaign treasury enabled him to implement what became a winning strategy on election day. The Illinois senator won a majority of the states, twenty-eight, and the District of Columbia. Holding all of the twenty constituencies won by John Kerry in 2004, Obama added nine states carried by Bush to his tally, as well as a single electoral vote from Nebraska.[13] Sweeping the Midwest (including three states won by Bush in 2004), carrying three of the former Confederate states in the South, and mobilizing new voters to win three of the eight Rocky Mountain domains, Obama won a national victory. The changing geographical results are clearly seen in Figures 3-1 and 3-2.

Even as Obama extended the Democrats' reach, the parties remained distinctive in their geographical bases of support. The Democrats did particularly well in the Northeast, the upper Midwest, and the Pacific Coast; the Republicans did best in the South Plains, and the smaller Mountain states. The geographical lines of party division remained substantially as they had

Figure 3-2 The Electoral Map of 2004



been in 2004,[14] but results varied more widely among the states, indicating increased polarization in the country.[15] Details of the presidential vote are shown in Table 3-1.

Obama shifted the lines of party cleavage to the Democrats' advantage.[16] Although he gained votes, compared to Kerry in 2004, he did not build his victory by simply focusing on the party's customary areas of strength. The party did gain popular vote share in its reliable states of the Northeast, upper Midwest, and Pacific Coast. But the largest gains, as seen in Table 3-1, came in areas in which Democrats previously had underperformed. They did especially well at the polls in such unfamiliar campaign sites as the Atlantic South, the Mountain states, and even North Dakota and Indiana. Obama did not win all of these states, but he set new benchmarks for future Democratic contenders.

The movement of the vote from Republican to Democrat could be seen in finer detail in maps of the results by counties rather than states.[17] While the Democratic trend was apparent in most of the nation, 22 percent of counties showed more support for McCain than they had for Bush in 2004. The pattern was consistent with the analysis of voter demography discussed below. The Democrats gained most in counties that had denser and growing populations and those with larger proportions of African American, Hispanic, Catholic, and college-educated residents. Republicans did better in counties

Table 3-1 The Presidential Vote of 2008

State	Popular vote (1,000s)		Two-party vote %, 2008		Two-party vote %, 2004		Turnout	Democrat vote
	Obama	McCain	Obama	McCain	Kerry	Bush	% gain 2004–2008	% gain 2004–2008
Alabama	813	1,267	39.1	60.9	37.1	62.9	11.2	2.0
Alaska	124	194	39.0	61.0	36.8	63.2	5.3	2.2
Arizona	1,035	1,230	45.7	54.3	44.7	55.3	13.4	1.0
Arkansas	422	638	39.8	60.2	45.1	54.9	1.6	–5.3
California	8,274	5,012	62.3	37.7	55.0	45.0	8.4	7.3
Colorado	1,289	1,074	54.5	45.5	47.6	52.4	12.4	6.9
Connecticut	998	629	61.3	38.7	55.3	44.7	4.9	6.0
Delaware	255	152	62.7	37.3	53.8	46.2	9.4	8.9
Dist. Columbia	246	17	93.5	6.5	90.5	9.5	17.4	3.0
Florida	4,282	4,046	51.4	48.6	47.5	52.5	10.3	3.9
Georgia	1,844	2,049	47.4	52.6	41.6	58.4	18.7	5.8
Hawaii	326	121	72.9	27.1	54.4	45.6	4.9	18.5
Idaho	236	403	36.9	63.1	30.7	69.3	8.3	6.2
Illinois	3,420	2,032	62.7	37.3	55.2	44.8	4.1	7.5
Indiana	1,374	1,346	50.5	49.5	39.6	60.4	11.1	10.9
Iowa	829	682	54.9	45.1	49.7	50.3	1.1	5.2
Kansas	515	700	42.4	57.6	37.1	62.9	3.8	5.3
Kentucky	752	1,048	41.8	58.2	40.0	60.0	1.0	1.8
Louisiana	783	1,148	40.5	59.5	42.7	57.3	0.5	–2.2
Maine	422	295	58.9	41.1	54.6	45.4	–1.4	4.3
Maryland	1,629	960	62.9	37.1	56.6	43.4	9.7	6.3
Massachusetts	1,904	1,109	63.2	36.8	62.7	37.3	4.8	0.5
Michigan	2,873	2,049	58.4	41.6	51.7	48.3	2.7	6.7
Minnesota	1,573	1,275	55.2	44.8	51.8	48.2	2.0	3.4
Mississippi	555	725	43.4	56.6	40.5	59.5	13.2	2,9
Missouri	1,442	1,446	49.9	50.1	46.4	53.6	6.4	3.5
Montana	232	243	48.8	51.2	39.5	60.5	8.0	9.3
Nebraska	333	453	42.4	57.6	33.2	66.8	2.5	9.2

(Continued)

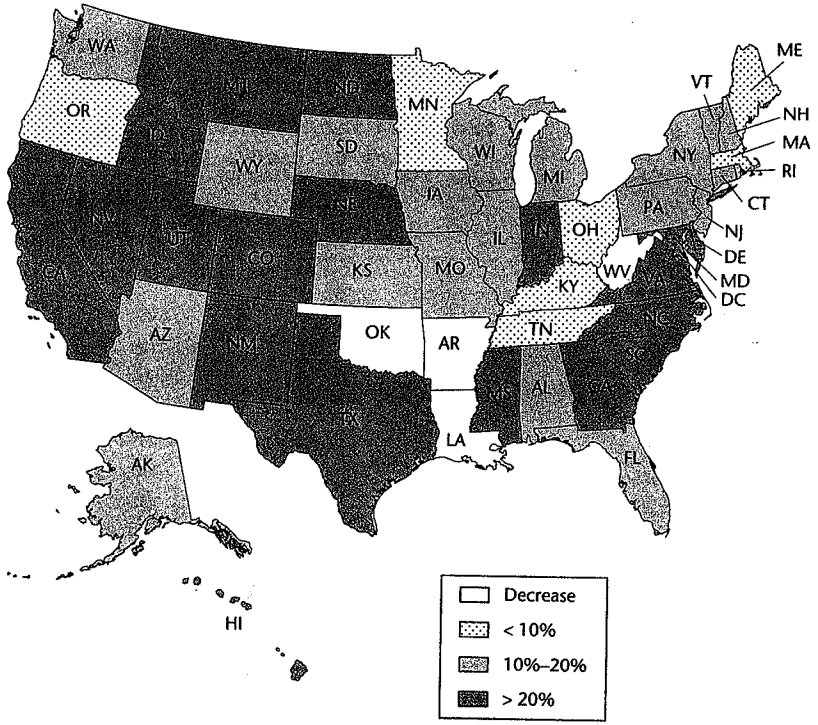
Table 3-1 The Presidential Vote of 2008 (Continued)

State	Popular vote (1,000s)		Two-party vote %, 2008		Two-party vote %, 2004		Turnout	Democrat vote
	Obama	McCain	Obama	McCain	Kerry	Bush	% gain 2004–2008	% gain 2004–2008
Nevada	534	413	56.4	43.6	48.7	51.3	16.1	7.7
New Hampshire	385	317	54.8	45.2	50.7	49.3	4.5	4.1
New Jersey	2,215	1,613	57.9	42.1	53.4	46.6	6.9	4.5
New Mexico	472	347	57.6	42.4	49.6	50.4	9.5	8.0
New York	4,770	2,742	63.5	36.5	59.3	40.7	3.2	4.2
North Carolina	2,143	2,128	50.2	49.8	43.8	56.2	22.5	6.4
North Dakota	141	169	45.5	54.5	36.1	63.9	0.6	9.4
Ohio	2,933	2,674	52.3	47.7	48.9	51.1	0.1	3.4
Oklahoma	502	960	34.3	65.7	34.4	65.6	–0.1	–0.1
Oregon	1,037	738	58.4	41.6	52.1	47.9	–1.9	6.3
Pennsylvania	3,276	2,656	55.2	44.8	51.3	48.7	3.5	3.9
Rhode Island	297	165	64.3	35.7	60.6	39.4	7.7	3.7
South Carolina	862	1,035	45.4	54.6	41.4	58.6	18.6	4.0
South Dakota	171	203	45.7	54.3	39.1	60.9	–2.1	6.6
Tennessee	1,087	1,479	42.4	57.6	42.8	57.2	6.0	–0.4
Texas	3,529	4,479	44.1	55.9	38.5	61.5	8.8	5.6
Utah	328	596	35.5	64.5	26.7	73.3	2.1	8.8
Vermont	219	99	68.9	31.1	60.3	39.7	4.3	8.6
Virginia	1,960	1,725	53.2	46.8	45.9	54.1	16.2	7.3
Washington	1,751	1,229	58.8	41.2	53.6	46.4	5.9	5.2
West Virginia	304	397	43.4	56.6	43.5	56.5	–6.7	–0.1
Wisconsin	1,677	1,262	57.1	42.9	50.2	49.8	–1.0	6.9
Wyoming	83	165	33.5	66.5	29.7	70.3	3.8	3.8
Totals	69,457	59,935	53.7	46.3	48.8	51.2	6.9	4.9

Sources: Dave Leip's Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections, uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS; elections.gmu.edu.

Notes: The total national vote was 131.4 million, 61.6 percent of those eligible. The total minor party vote was 1.98 million, 1.5 percent of the total vote, for 21 candidates, including Independent Ralph Nader, 0.56 percent, and Libertarian Bob Barr, 0.40 percent.

Figure 3-3 Increases in Democratic Vote, 2004–2008



whose residents were poorer, less educated, Southern Baptist, and white. The combined effect of these characteristics was that Republican gains were concentrated in the poorer and less developed areas of the South and border states and along the southern Appalachians, as shown in Figure 3-3.

Demography

Change was also evident in the behavior of individual voters, as seen in the patterns detailed in Table 3-2. Democrats and Republicans held to their partisan loyalties, with nine of ten Democrats supporting Obama and nine of ten Republicans supporting McCain. Hillary Clinton's backers followed her lead and returned to their party, joined by a majority of independents. The voters also divided as expected along ideological lines, particularly liberals who cohesively supported the Democratic candidate. McCain lost both the swing moderate voters and a sizable fraction of independent conservatives.

The demographic patterns in the vote were similar to those of the past. Obama did better among women (with a gender gap of 5 percent), the unmarried, the young, Catholics, Jews (contrary to pre-election murmurs),[18] urban residents, gays, persons with lower incomes, less religiously committed

Table 3-2 Demography of the Vote in 2008

% of vote		% Obama	% McCain	% shift 2004–2008*
	Partisanship and ideology			
15	Democratic liberals	96	3	1
19	Democratic moderates	87	13	0
5	Democratic conservatives	77	20	1
(14	Clinton Democrats	83	16	--)
5	Independent liberals	81	15	2
16	Independent moderates	56	41	3
8	Independent conservatives	26	70	7
1	Republican liberals	29	67	7
10	Republican moderates	17	82	6
21	Republican conservatives	4	95	1
22	Liberal	89	10	4
44	Moderate	60	39	6
34	Conservative	20	78	5
11	First-time voters	69	30	16
89	Previous voters	51	48	3
	Sex and race			
36	White men	41	57	4
39	White women	46	53	2
5	Black men	95	5	9
7	Black women	96	3	6
4	Latino men	64	33	8
5	Latino women	68	30	12
5	Other men and women	64	32	6
	Age			
18	18–29	66	32	12
29	30–44	52	46	6
30	45–59	49	49	2
23	60 and older	47	51	–2
	Yearly income			
38	Less than $50,000	60	38	4
36	$50,000–$100,000	49	49	5
26	More than $100,000	49	49	6
	Education			
24	No college	54	44	7
31	Some college	51	47	5
28	College graduate	50	48	4
17	Postgraduate	58	40	3
	Religion			
54	Protestant	45	54	5
27	Catholic	54	45	7
2	Jewish	78	21	4
18	Other/None	74	23	8
	Church attendance			
40	Weekly	43	55	4
42	Occasionally	57	42	4
16	Never	67	30	5

(Continued)

Table 3-2 Demography of the Vote in 2008 (Continued)

% of vote		% Obama	% McCain	% shift 2004–2008*
	Family status			
32	Married women	47	50	3
21	Unmarried women	71	29	9
33	Married men	47	53	8
14	Unmarried men	59	37	6
	Relationships			
40	Parents of children < 18	52	41	7
21	Union household	59	39	0
42	Gun owner	37	62	1
15	Veteran	44	54	3
4	Gay, lesbian, bisexual	70	27	–7
	Size of place and region			
11	Large cities	70	28	8
19	Smaller cities (50,000–500,000)	59	39	9
49	Suburban	50	48	2
7	Small towns	45	53	–4
14	Rural	45	53	5
21	Northeast	59	40	3
24	Midwest	54	44	6
32	South	45	54	3
23	West	57	40	7
	Whites only			
74	All	43	57	2
11	Age 18–29	54	44	10
13	Age 65 and older	40	58	–4
25	Income less than $50,000	47	51	0
49	Income more than $50,000	43	56	5
39	No college degree	40	58	3
14	Postgraduate education	55	45	4
42	Protestant	34	65	2
26	Evangelical	24	74	3
19	Catholic	47	52	4
23	Democrats	85	14	–2
23	Independents	47	49	1
29	Republicans	8	91	3

Source: National Exit Poll, as reported on cnn.com and election.cbsnews.com/election2008.
*Difference of percentage of two-party vote for Obama compared to Kerry.

voters, and both the least and the most educated. More important to the election outcome were shifts within these groups. Obama won new support for the Democratic ticket, compared to Kerry in 2004, in virtually every demographic and affinity group, as defined by sex, race, age, religion, education, income, family status, residence, and region.

Some shifts were larger than others. A group's effect on the overall vote depends on two measures: the size of the group and the division of its vote between the competing candidates. Some groups are so large—such as whites or women—that even a small advantage for one candidate may be decisive. Other groups have an impact because they give their support primarily to one

candidate. One such group in 2008 was young voters. Although persons aged eighteen to twenty-nine hardly increased their share of the total vote (18 percent in 2008, up from 17 percent in 2004), they did change their preferences markedly. A small 54 percent to 46 percent margin for Kerry over Bush became an overwhelming 66 percent to 32 percent preference for Obama over McCain. That shift added two to three million votes to the Democrats.[19]

Minority voters had the greatest effect on the election result. African Americans and Latinos affected the outcome both by increased turnout, as they voted in larger numbers than in 2004, and by more marked support of the Democratic candidate. The strong support of Latinos for Obama holds a special portent for the future. Latinos are already the largest minority group in the nation, and their share of the electorate will grow considerably as the children of recent immigrants (citizens even if their parents are not) reach maturity. Republican hopes to build a national majority coalition depended on their support, but these hopes crumbled in 2008. Asian Americans, although small as a percentage of the overall population, also voted for Obama. The total effect of ethnic minorities, as detailed in Table 3-3, was to add more than seven million votes to Obama's tally, the lion's share (nearly three-fourths) of the Democrats' overall gain in votes.[20]

Although minority voters were critical to the Obama victory, it remains true that he won only because he also gained substantial support from whites, the largest ethnic group in the electorate. Rather than showing racial repugnance toward a black candidate, whites increased their support of the Democrats. The white shift was limited, and a majority of whites continued to vote Republican, as they had for forty years. But Obama actually did better among white voters than most recent Democratic candidates, all of whom were themselves white.

As seen in the bottom portion of Table 3-2, strong white opposition to Obama was limited to a few demographic groups; others increased their Democratic vote, and party loyalties largely overrode racial defections. There was considerable opposition to Obama in the white working class, as expected, but this opposition cannot be attributed simply to racism, since these "Reagan Democrats" have also been voting for years against the party's white candidates. In fact, Obama did considerably better among the white working class than Kerry did in 2004, adding five points to gain a 41 percent share of their votes.[21]

Regional residence had a considerable effect on white voters. In eight of the eleven southern states (as well as in five other states), Obama fell below 35 percent among whites—and plummeted below 20 percent in the Deep South. In these areas, the vote against Obama—who scored lower than Kerry—likely reflected racial prejudices. But in other states, most whites apparently overcame whatever racist feelings they may have held. In eighteen states, a majority of whites actually voted for Obama.[22]

Although race certainly had an effect on the outcome, that effect was direct and open. During the campaign, many observers had anguished that the influence of race would be both hidden and malevolent. Commentators showed particular concern over a "Bradley effect," the possible tendency of poll respondents

Table 3-3 Ethnic Shifts and Impact in the 2008 Presidential Vote

	2008	2004
Total two-party vote	131,371	121,058
Total Democratic vote	69,457	59,029
White % of vote	0.74	0.77
White % for Democrat	0.43	0.41
White vote for Democrat	41,802	38,218
White increase for Obama	3,584	
Black % of vote	0.13	0.11
Black % for Democrat	0.95	0.88
Black vote for Democrat	16,224	11,718
Black increase for Obama	4,506	
Latino % of vote	0.09	0.08
Latino % for Democrat	0.67	0.56
Latino vote for Democrat	7,922	5,423
Latino increase for Obama	2,498	
Asian/other % of vote	0.04	0.04
Asian/other % for Democrat	0.63	0.57
Asian/other vote for Democrat	3,311	2,760
Asian/other increase for Obama	550	
Total minority % of vote	0.26	0.23
Total minority % for Democrat	0.80	0.71
Total minority vote for Democrat	27,457	19,902
Total minority increase for Obama	7,555	
Minority % of Democratic vote	39.5%	33.7%
Minority % of Democratic increase	72.4%	

Source: Author's calculations, based on presidential vote (Table 3-1) and National Election Poll.
Note: Votes are in 1,000s.

to falsely declare their support for a black candidate to meet social expectations of tolerance, while intending to vote against the minority candidate in the privacy of the polling booth.[23] In reality, there had never been such an effect (even in the original reported instance), and it could not be located in opinion surveys, despite ingenious investigations by pollsters. Logically, the entire fear was senseless, because there was no reason for voters to lie to anonymous pollsters about their vote intention when they could easily disguise racist motivations. Still, the discussion provided grist for commentators' mills and added one more item to the list of urban legends about public opinion.

The Campaign

The 2008 election year started with bad news for the Republicans and ended worse, with the victory of Barack Obama. The intervening months saw a series of astonishing events and turns in political fortunes.

As the year opened, Democrats had many reasons to be optimistic. In the congressional elections of 2006, they had wrested back control of both houses, giving them a platform to criticize and investigate the Republican

administration. Public evaluations of the incumbent president, a consistent predictor of the November vote, were sharply negative: in January 2008 only 32 percent approved of George W. Bush's job performance (half of them only tepidly), whereas 66 percent disapproved (three-fourths fervently). Voters were also pessimistic about the country's course: three-fourths saw the nation on "the wrong track," whereas only a fifth saw it going in "the right direction." The economy was showing signs of decline, most obviously in the collapse of housing values and mortgage credit, which ultimately would threaten foreclosures on four million homes. These troubles made the economy the most important issue in the election, emphasizing a traditional source of Democratic strength.

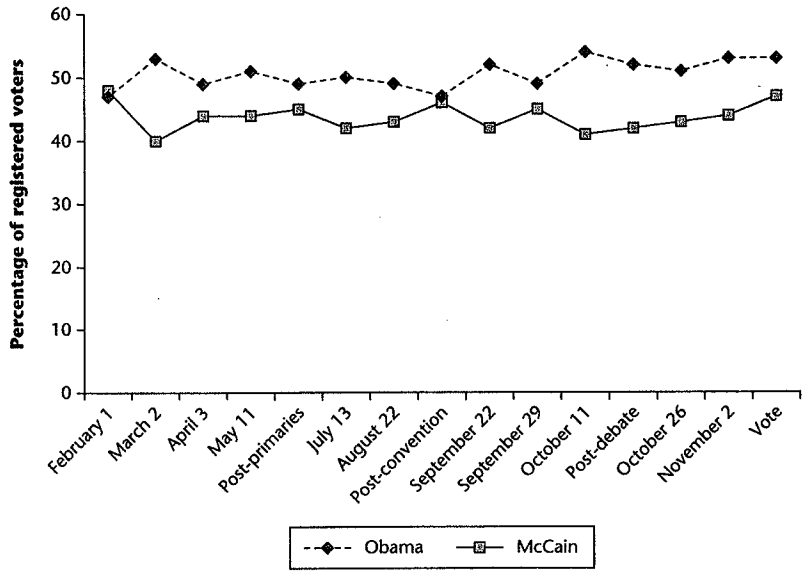
The most important action of the Bush administration, the invasion of Iraq, had become the longest war in U.S. history since its independence, and there appeared to be no end in sight. On that issue, too, the public rejected the Bush administration, with two-thirds believing that the war was "not worth fighting." The conflict had brought both Obama and McCain prominence in their parties—Obama for his early opposition, McCain for his fervent support, even in times of military stalemate. Ironically, the issue faded even as the two won their parties' nominations, although it would still leave a mark on the election: long before the nominations were settled, voters had a more favorable impression of Obama than of McCain.

The presidential nominations (analyzed fully in chapter 2) did little to change the favorable outlook for Democrats. Although their contest concluded quickly, Republicans fought it in ways that limited their potential appeal to moderate voters in the general election. In televised debates, most of the party's aspirants competed in doubting the theory of evolution and in testifying to the literal truth of the Bible to prove their credentials to their most conservative activists. Pursuing similar tactics, McCain proudly asserted that 90 percent of his Senate votes had supported President Bush's initiatives—a boast he would later regret.

The Democratic nominating contest went on far longer, eventually reaching every state and territory by early June. By then Obama had won a narrow victory in popular votes[24] and a clear majority of delegates. Although often heated and sometimes personal, the close contest did no apparent harm to the party: Obama continued to lead McCain in national surveys (as illustrated in Figure 3-4). In the end, the nominating race may have actually benefited the Democrats by sharpening Obama's debating skills and by enlisting large numbers of voters into the party ranks. Ultimately, nearly forty million voters participated in the Democratic primaries, an astonishingly high proportion of the party's eventual vote in November.

The two nominees, McCain and Obama, could hardly have been more different. They were of two different generations, twenty-five years apart in age. Nor would any voter miss the difference between a white and a biracial candidate. Their lives also had been sharply distinct—the Republican a scion of a prominent military family and himself a distinguished veteran of the Vietnam War versus the Democrat abandoned by his Kenyan father and raised by an unconventional white mother and grandparents before achieving notable academic and professional success. McCain had been a

Figure 3-4 The 2008 Presidential Race in the Polls



Source: Washington Post/ABC News

national legislator for more than twenty-five years, Obama for less than four. They disagreed on most issues, ranging from economic policy to the Iraq War, portending a vigorous combat in the presidential race.

The two candidates also embodied two mythic symbols, delineated by sociologist Todd Gitlin. McCain represented "the known quantity, the maverick turned lawman, fiery when called on to fight, an icon of the old known American story of standing tall, holding firm, protecting God's country against the stealthy foe." Obama represented a different archetype, "the new kid on the block, the immigrant's child, the recruit, fervent but still preternaturally calm, embodying some complicated future that we haven't yet mapped, let alone experienced."[25]

The candidates shifted into high gear after the parties' late-summer national conventions. In 2008, in contrast to most other years, the general election campaign did make a difference—it brought Obama rising support and ultimate victory. Four factors were important in determining the outcome: the nomination of Sarah Palin, the collapse of the economy, the candidates' performances in the televised debates, and the quality of the Obama and McCain organizations.

The Nomination of Sarah Palin

As Democratic Party delegates left Denver the morning after their convention, still hearing Obama's stirring acceptance speech before a stadium

crowd of eighty thousand, they were heady with the expectation of victory. McCain quickly deflated their joyful balloons by immediately announcing his surprising choice for the Republican vice-presidential nomination: Alaska governor Sarah Palin.

McCain, knowing all year that the circumstances of the election were unfavorable, and seeing that he trailed in the polls, looked to change the course of the race by making the daring choice of Palin to be his running mate. His personal favorite for vice president was Connecticut senator Joseph Lieberman, the Democratic vice-presidential candidate in 2000 who was both a personal friend and a fellow advocate of vigorous prosecution of the Iraq War. A cross-party ticket would change the arc of the campaign and reinforce McCain's vaunted image as an independent maverick. Lieberman, however, was unacceptable to Republican social conservatives because he supported abortion rights. Instead, McCain's staff convinced him to select Palin, the favorite of social conservative advisers.[26]

At first, choosing Palin appeared to be a brilliant stroke, the bold and unconventional choice of a woman who might appeal to former loyalists of Hillary Clinton, a conservative who would rally those on the right still skeptical of McCain's reputed moderation, and a state executive with some claims as a reformer of political ethics. Palin also cast an exotic personal figure .She lived in an atypical state; was a young, attractive mother of five children; and was so committed to the "right to life" that she knowingly gave birth to a child with Down Syndrome. She delivered a rousing acceptance speech at the Republican convention and drew ecstatic reactions from conservative commentators and large, energetic crowds. Suddenly, the race tightened, with McCain either tied or ahead of Obama in the polls.

Soon, however, the glamour faded. Televised interviews showed that Palin had little knowledge of most national issues, particularly those involving foreign policy. Admiration turned to ridicule in the news media and television comedies when, for example, she claimed expertise in international affairs because Russia is within sight of Alaska. Intensive investigations also raised questions about Palin's personal character, including her spending of $150,000 of party funds for campaign clothing, her use of Alaska state travel funds for days spent at home, and the possible abuse of her gubernatorial power in a dispute with her former brother-in-law.

Palin's ultimate effect on the election is uncertain, but it was probably harmful to McCain. Her nomination alienated some prominent Republican leaders, such as Colin Powell and Christopher Buckley. Three out of five voters considered her not qualified to step in as president, while only one of six rendered the same dour judgment of Obama's running mate, Joseph Biden. Palin's nomination probably also gave greater weight to McCain's age. The controversial governor, teamed with seventy-two-year-old McCain and, in the conventional phrase, "a heartbeat away from the presidency," led 39 percent of voters to say that age was an important criterion. McCain and Palin lost these voters overwhelmingly, carrying only 32 percent of that group.

The Economic Collapse

More serious matters quickly came to dominate the election. The nation's financial system, already weak, appeared in mid-September to be on the verge of collapse. Losses from bad mortgages rippled through the web of financial institutions—banks, brokers, investors, lenders, and borrowers. A torrent of bad economic news changed the electoral frame. Inflation spiked in response to record high prices for oil, with gasoline selling for more than $4 a gallon. At the same time, unemployment grew to a five-year high. One financial catastrophe followed another: seizure of the largest mortgage lender in the United States; the largest bank failure in U.S. history; forced sales of major stock brokerage firms; federal takeover of the secondary lenders holding half of the country's mortgages; government stock acquisition and huge loans to the world's largest insurance company; and the government-encouraged failure of Lehman Brothers, the largest bankruptcy in U.S. history. The consequent economic crisis caused large losses in the values of U.S. and global stocks, which dropped more than 25 percent from the time of the nominating conventions to election day.

Voters were frightened by the severe threats to their job prospects, lifestyles, savings, and retirement pensions. The political stakes also rose as the Bush administration proposed that Congress provide $700 billion to rescue the financial system and give the secretary of the Treasury virtually unlimited power to spend this gushing federal money. The credit crisis and the proposed "bailout" legislation made the economy the predominant issue in the presidential election.

The focus on the economy inevitably aided the Democrats, always more trusted by voters on these issues, and harmed the Republicans, who bore the burden of the Bush record. The candidates' reactions magnified these effects. Obama, while indicating reserved acceptance of the financial rescue plan, also tried to turn the crisis to his advantage by blaming the "failed economic philosophy" shared by McCain and Bush. McCain fumbled the opportunity, however limited, to gain support from the crisis. Trying to present himself as calm in the storm, he first said, "The fundamentals of our economy are strong," which hardly seemed true to fearful voters. Then, in an attempt to demonstrate leadership, he announced that he was suspending his campaign to return to Washington and develop an appropriate plan in consultation with other Republicans, even if that meant delaying or canceling the first presidential debate.

As it turned out, McCain's congressional colleagues were not interested in his advice, and House Republicans united to oppose the Bush proposal. Although most Democrats and their party leaders did support an amended bailout plan, Republican opposition defeated it, which led in turn to another plunge of the stock market. Obama, remaining cool, in effect called McCain's bluff. He continued to prepare for the first debate, eagerly awaited by the national audience. Despite the turmoil, McCain then decided, only hours before the scheduled time, to participate in the September 26 event.

Table 3-4 The Economic Issue

Poll response	% of population	% Obama	% McCain
Economy most important issue	63	53	44
Very worried about economic conditions	50	60	38
National economic conditions poor	49	66	31
Family situation is worse	42	71	28
Very worried crisis will hurt family	46	62	36
Support financial bailout	39	59	40
Very worried about health care costs	33	66	32
Tax rise no matter who wins	49	55	42
Country on the wrong track	75	62	36

Source: National Election Poll.

The economic issue dominated both the debates (discussed below) and the eventual voting. In March 2008, it had already become the most important issue on voters' minds, but at that time it was stressed by only 29 percent of those surveyed.[27] By election day, the economy was the principal issue to 63 percent of the electorate, a greater focus on one issue than had ever been recorded in opinion surveys—even more than Vietnam in 1968 or Iraq in 2004. Voters were worried for themselves and their families, and about national conditions, health care, and the general direction of the country. Table 3-4 presents the public's most typical responses to a series of questions. All show deep concern about the economy and, consequently, large support for Obama. Those worries were the determining influences on the election.

Television: Deliberation, Debates, and Decisions

The economic issue and intense public interest in the election carried over to the televised debates between the candidates. Three featured Obama and McCain and one the vice-presidential contenders. Each debate drew an audience of sixty to seventy-five million viewers; the most watched event, uncharacteristically, being the confrontation between Biden and Palin. Its popularity surely resulted from interest in the Republican candidate. Some voters wanted to judge this controversial nominee; others may have expected a disaster for her, a political version of highly rated reality programs like *American Idol* or *Survivor.*

The first debate between Obama and McCain came as Congress was considering the financial rescue plan and inevitably focused on the economic issue. Next was the vice-presidential clash, in which Palin's folksy manner and language made her more likeable to some, more bizarre to others. The presidential candidates then addressed the electorate in a town-hall format, including questions gathered from YouTube videos, returning to a focus on economic and other issues. The debates concluded three weeks before the election with a face-to-face, but barely civil, discussion between McCain and Obama. Attention strangely focused on "Joe the Plumber," a working-class

McCain supporter who had recently conducted a street colloquy with Obama about taxes. Both candidates used this ballyhooed "common man" to exemplify their sharp differences on tax policy:

MCCAIN: Joe wants to buy the business that he has been in for all of these years, worked ten, twelve hours a day. And he wanted to buy the business, but he looked at your tax plan, and he saw that he was going to pay much higher taxes. . . . Now Senator Obama talks about the very, very rich. Joe, I want to tell you, I'll not only help you buy that business that you worked your whole life for, and I'll keep your taxes low.

OBAMA: I think tax policy is a major difference between Senator McCain and myself. And we both want to cut taxes, the difference is who we want to cut taxes for. . . . Now, Senator McCain, the centerpiece of his economic proposal is to provide $200 billion in additional tax breaks to some of the wealthiest corporations in America. What I've said is I want to provide a tax cut for 95 percent of working Americans, 95 percent. If you make less than a quarter million dollars a year, then you will not see your income tax go up, your capital gains tax go up, your payroll tax.

MCCAIN: You know, when Senator Obama ended up his conversation with Joe the Plumber—[he said] we need to spread the wealth around. In other words, we're going to take Joe's money, give it to Senator Obama, and let him spread the wealth around. I want Joe the Plumber to spread that wealth around. The whole premise behind Senator Obama's plans are class warfare, let's spread the wealth around. Who—why would you want to increase anybody's taxes right now?

OBAMA: I want to cut taxes for 95 percent of Americans. Now, it is true that my friend and supporter, Warren Buffett, for example, could afford to pay a little more in taxes in order . . . to give additional tax cuts to Joe the Plumber before he was at the point where he could make $250,000. . . . So, look, nobody likes taxes. I would prefer that none of us had to pay taxes, including myself. But ultimately, we've got to pay for the core investments that make this economy strong, and somebody's got to do it.

MCCAIN: Nobody likes taxes. Let's not raise anybody's taxes. OK?

OBAMA: Well, I don't mind paying a little more.

MCCAIN: We need to cut the business tax rate in America. We need to encourage business. Now, of all times in America, we need to cut people's taxes. We need to encourage business, create jobs, not spread the wealth around.[28]

Taken together, the debates displayed the clear differences that existed in 2008 between the candidates and their parties. Although policy issues supplied the content of the debates, the essential political point for both candidates was to win votes, not to define positions. On this criterion, Obama clearly dominated.

In a year of voter discontent, the televised confrontations favored the Democrat by reinforcing the basic narrative of the campaign: Obama's focus on change, McCain's on experience. In the debates themselves, Obama presented the calmer demeanor, one more appropriate to the "cool" medium of television. McCain was more agitated, more critical of his opponent, and more erratic in his personal appearance, even wandering around the stage at times during the town-hall debate.

For Obama, the greatest benefit of the debates—and of the lengthy campaign—was simple exposure. He began his presidential quest with limited public recognition, an exotic and unconventional background, a thin record in office, and the inescapable but politically charged identity of a black man. The debates and the months on the stump made him both familiar and comfortable to the electorate. They provided a "prolonged tryout," enabling Obama to quiet "an ambiguous and slightly suspicious response from much of the public."[29] Macomb County, Michigan, the archetypal locale of Reagan Democrats, evidenced this change. Before the Democratic convention, only 40 percent of its voters were "comfortable with the idea of Mr. Obama as president." By election day, that comfort level had risen to 60 percent.[30]

Polls showed the effects. After each of the debates, presidential and vice-presidential, the national audience deemed the Democrat the "winner."[31] That judgment was quite different from previous elections, when evaluations changed from one debate to another and were skewed by partisanship. Relying on these television appearances, public evaluations of both Democratic candidates became more favorable, while judgments of both Republican candidates declined. Obama's onscreen behavior also gave him a new advantage. Voters now saw him as the candidate more likely to "deal wisely with a crisis," reversing McCain's previous lead on that criterion that had been based on his military experience.[32] During the debates, Obama opened a clear lead and kept it through election day.

Campaign Organizations

The final important difference in the election stemmed from the respective quality of the two candidates' organizations. By every standard, Obama's organization dominated. He did not run a perfect race—despite post-election mythology, all winners make mistakes, and all losers do some things right. But the Obama campaign was probably the most effective in any modern election, combining the techniques Obama learned as a local community organizer on Chicago's South Side with the older effective practices of the city's ward politics.

The Democratic candidate had another advantage, unusual for his party's nominees: money. Obama declined the $84 million in federal campaign funds for which each major party nominee was eligible, the first candidate to abstain from the funding system since it was established in 1976. He instead relied on his pathbreaking organization to raise extraordinary amounts of money from private sources, a total of close to $500 million in the fall contest alone. But McCain—coauthor of the most recent campaign finance law—did accept the $84 million in government money and, with it, the law's ban on additional fund raising, incurring a definite disadvantage in the contest (see chapter 8).

The candidates campaigned vigorously: Obama flew eighty thousand miles, McCain seventy thousand. As detailed in Table 3-5, they and their running mates made personal appearances throughout most of the country, in contrast to previous elections, when the contenders concentrated their attention on a very few "battleground" states. At least one candidate was in thirty states after the conventions, and they had visited many of the others earlier during the nominating contests.

The wide geographical scope of the campaigns owed much to Obama's strategy of challenging the Republicans in their previous redoubts, as well as to his immense treasury, which enabled him to implement that strategy. The states most visited by the candidates were primarily those won by Bush in 2004. Of the fourteen states that hosted nine or more candidate appearances, ten had voted Republican previously. These were the new battlegrounds of 2008, and all but Missouri fell to the Democrats.

Obama had a consistent theme in his geographically broad campaign. His constant emphasis was "change," with rhetorical variations: "Change we can believe in," "The change we need," "We are the change." This appeal was itself quite vague, although backed by extensive policy proposals on a wide range of issues. In the conditions facing the country, however, change had great thematic resonance, much as it did when Dwight Eisenhower won support with his own vague promise of "Time for a Change" in 1952 or John Kennedy did with his unspecific invocation of a "New Frontier" in 1960.[33]

McCain lacked not only a shimmering slogan, but even a clear direction to his campaign. Much of his early effort was based simply on his personal attributes: his experience, heroism, and integrity. But his exemplary record was less resonant as the election turned away from foreign policy.[34] Since the electorate seemed to value Obama's "change" message more than McCain's countering appeal to "experience," McCain shifted to a more conservative message, hoping to recreate the Bush winning coalition and selecting Palin to underline that direction. At the same time, however, he tried to distance himself from his party's conservative but unpopular president, presenting himself as the exponent of true change.

When that did not work, McCain and Palin shifted to criticism of Obama, first deriding his oratorical skills as mere celebrity power, then attempting to portray him as a leftist, one who "pals around with terrorists" (specifically, a neighbor of the Obamas in Chicago who had been a leader of the 1960s radical group Weather Underground). But neither the heroic

Table 3-5 Candidate Visits in the 2008 Campaign

						Bush states, 2004		Kerry states, 2004	
State	Obama	McCain	Biden	Palin	Total	Republican	Democrat	Republican	Democrat
Alabama					0				
Alaska				2	2	2			
Arizona		1			1	1			
Arkansas					0				
California	1			2	3			2	1
Colorado	5	5	2	5	17	10	7		
Connecticut					0				
Delaware			3		3				3
Dist. Columbia	1	1	1		3			1	2
Florida	10	7	4	6	27	13	14		
Georgia					0				
Hawaii	1				1				1
Idaho					0				
Illinois	1		1		2				2
Indiana	5	1	3	3	12	4	8		
Iowa	1	4	1	3	9	7	2		
Kansas					0				
Kentucky					0				
Louisiana					0				
Maine				1	1			1	
Maryland		2	1		3			2	1
Massachusetts					0				
Michigan	3	3	2	2	10			5	5
Minnesota		2		1	3			3	0
Mississippi					0				
Missouri	3	3	5	4	15	7	8		
Montana			1		1		1		
Nebraska				1	1	1			
Nevada	4	1	1	3	9	4	5		
New Hampshire	3	4	3	1	11			5	6
New Jersey					0				
New Mexico	2	5	1	1	9	6	3		
New York	1	4		2	7			6	1
North Carolina	6	3	4	4	17	7	10		
North Dakota					0				
Ohio	7	12	8	13	40	25	15		
Oklahoma					0				
Oregon					0				
Pennsylvania	6	11	7	12	36			23	13
Rhode Island					0				
South Carolina					0				
South Dakota					0				
Tennessee		1			1	1			
Texas			1	1	2	1	1		
Utah					0				
Vermont					0				
Virginia	9	5	5	5	24	10	14		
Washington			1		1				1
West Virginia			1		1		1		
Wisconsin	2	5	1	4	12			9	3
Wyoming					0				
Totals	71	80	57	76	284	99	89	57	39

Sources: Daily reports in *New York Times* and at abcnews.com.

Note: Days in Washington and home visits excluded.

McCain biography nor the attacks on Obama resonated in an election forty years after the Vietnam War and the polarizing politics it had engendered. As a sardonic columnist wrote, "I sometimes wondered whether most Americans thought the Weather Underground was a reunion band."[35] The final Republican tactic, which McCain deployed in the last televised debate, was to attack Obama on tax policy. It gained the ticket some, but far too few, votes. In all, McCain tried many themes, but none worked. To his credit, he refused to employ the one campaign thrust that might have succeeded—an emphasis on race, by tying Obama to his vituperative former pastor, Jeremiah Wright.

Beyond the different emphases on themes and issues, the two campaign organizations were mismatched tactically, with the Obama campaigners vastly superior. They contacted more voters personally—possibly more than twice as many;[36] they ran far more television ads; they commanded the new techniques of Internet campaigning; and they mobilized millions of paid and volunteer staff members to identify supporters, register them as voters, and get them to mark their ballots early or at the polls.

The statistics of the Obama effort are staggeringly impressive. Primarily using the Internet rather than traditional events, the campaign raised $750 million from over three million contributors, with a median contribution of less than $200.[37] In this effort, the candidate's organization developed an e-mail list of thirteen million addresses and sent a billion messages to the list. It also sponsored 35,000 volunteer groups, 3.2 million Facebook enrollments, and 3 million phone calls to spur turnout in the last four days before the election.[38]

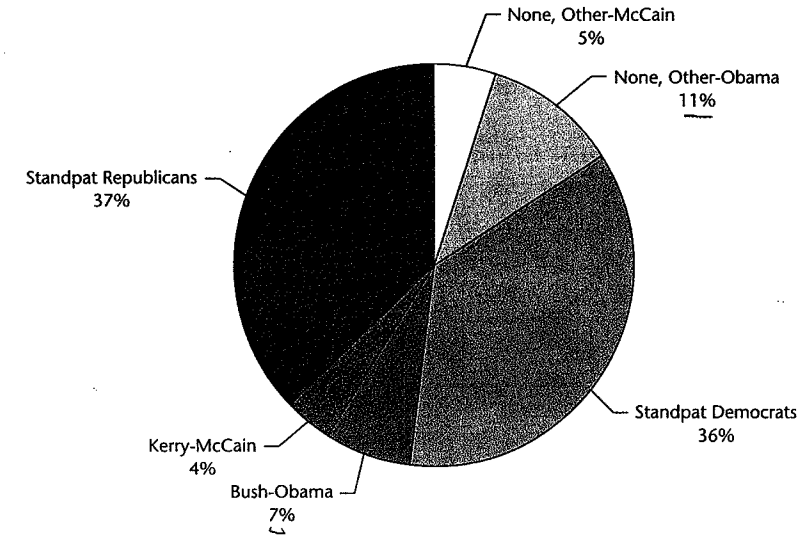
Just as plane travel and television transformed electioneering in the twentieth century, the Obama campaign created a new politics for the twenty-first. Compared to previous operations, a former adversary conceded, "They were Apollo 11, and we were the Wright Brothers." Obama's innovators understood, and led, the changes wrought by cable television, the 24/7 news cycle, text messaging, and the Internet and its innumerable new sites, from individual blogs to social networking sites such as YouTube and Facebook. The success of the Obama campaign will certainly affect future candidacies. The campaign's fund-raising prowess has probably doomed public financing for future presidential elections. In a different portent for the conduct of politics, Obama's ability to withstand negative campaigning—from Hillary Clinton in the primaries and from McCain and particularly Palin in the general election—may set a new and promising tone in future contests.[39]

Outcomes

Voters' Decisions

These elements of the Obama campaign came together in the balloting that culminated on November 4. Substantial change was evident, not only in the total result, but also in the movement of voters, shown in Figure 3-5. Although

Figure 3-5 Flow of the Vote, 2004–2008



almost three-fourths ended up as standpat supporters of the same party in 2004 and 2008, many others changed their allegiance or became new participants. Obama won the election on the basis of those switchers and entrants.

Like the change in the vote between elections, Obama's strength grew during the course of the campaign as voters considered the positions and individual traits of the competitors. From September through the end of the campaign, Obama gained more positive evaluations from voters on most criteria (as detailed in Table 3-6). He became more trusted than McCain to deal with the economy, taxes, and an unexpected crisis, and was highly preferred on health care and Iraq. Obama resolved most voters' doubts about his readiness to be president and his personal values. McCain, on the other hand, lost ground on some criteria, even in his previous strengths, such as personal leadership, crisis management, and honesty.

As they came to their decisions, individual voters went through a silent, often unconscious, calculation. They emphasized either issues (as 60 percent claimed) or the candidates' personal traits (40 percent). Then they emphasized a particular issue or trait, and finally they voted for the man they preferred based on that criterion. Table 3-7 is an attempt to reconstruct their reasoning and estimate the contribution of each influence on the vote for Obama and McCain.

Obama's victory, not surprisingly, was based on the issue of the economy, with additional votes coming from the issues of Iraq and health care. He was overwhelmingly seen as the candidate of change and as empathetic to the needs of the electorate. McCain had some strengths too, on the issue of terrorism, his record of experience, and his values, but these were of lesser importance to the voters. Terrorism had faded as a concern in the seven years

Table 3-6 Changes in Candidate Evaluations

	% Obama		% McCain	
	Pre-election	September	Pre-election	September
Favorable ratings*	51	48	41	39
Trust more to deal with the economy**	54	47	40	42
Trust more to deal with unexpected major crisis**	49	37	46	54
Trust more to deal with taxes**	52	45	43	44
Shares Americans' values*	65	66	64	61
Understands your needs and problems*	64	66	49	49
Effective commander-in-chief*	64	61	76	73
Prepared to be president*	56	48	64	71
Spends time mostly attacking other candidate*	22	35	64	53
Would bring needed change in Washington**	61	51	29	39
Is the stronger leader**	54	44	40	48
Is more honest and trustworthy**	44	38	40	44

Sources: *CBS News/*New York Times* polls October 23, 30; **Washington Post*/ABC News polls November 2, October 11.

Table 3-7 Influences on the Presidential Vote

		Vote		Contribution to the vote	
Influences on vote	% of total	% Obama	% McCain	Obama	McCain
Issues (60%)					
Energy	4.3	52	48	2.2	2.1
Iraq	6.1	60	40	3.7	2.4
Economy	38.6	55	45	21.2	17.4
Terrorism	5.5	13	87	0.7	4.8
Health care	5.5	74	26	4.1	1.4
Traits (40%)					
Shares my values	12.5	33	67	4.1	8.4
Can bring change	14.1	91	9	12.9	1.3
Experience	8.3	7	93	0.6	7.7
Cares about people	5.0	75	25	3.7	1.2
Totals	99.9			53.2	46.7

Source: Author's calculations from National Election Poll data. Contribution to the vote is calculated by multiplying the percentage emphasizing the issue or trait (column 2) by the percentage voting for the candidate (column 3 or 4).

since 9/11, and the cultural wars had come to a truce. In the new politics of 2008, McCain was out of date.

The election results were not inevitable, but they did fit with established models of political behavior. The fundamental causes were set months before the party conventions, the debates, and the campaign maneuvers. The voters' verdict in 2008 was a retrospective negative judgment of the Republican administration. It resembled similar past elections, grounded in the public's economic discontents (as in 1932), its wish for a change in political parties (as in 1952), and the unpopularity of the president (as in 1980).

Other predictive theories proved invalid. A majority of Americans proved they would vote for an African American, including a decisive majority of Latinos and a significant proportion of southern whites. The hyped culture wars,

were muted, if not fully ended.[40] Conflicts over social issues such as abortion and gay marriage were hardly noticeable in voters' consciousness in 2008 and did not divert them from their focus on economic concerns. The vaunted new Republican majority disappeared. Based on politically constant, as well as immediate determining, features, the new politics of 2008, in the end, looked familiar.

Future Implications

The 2008 election has been widely described as "historic." But its long-term import remains uncertain.

The election's most obvious significance was race. Obama's election culminated the long struggle of African Americans for political equality. Only forty-five years earlier, Martin Luther King Jr. had dreamed that someday the nation's children would be judged "not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." In the figure of a child who was only two years old at the time, that dream became real on November 4. For whites it was also a time of personal liberation, a redeeming renunciation of the shame of racism. As Obama himself expressed the nation's pride: "If there is anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible; who still wonders if the dream of our founders is alive in our time; who still questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer."

Beyond the thrilling moment of equality and liberation, future consequences are less certain. By taking the presidential oath on January 20, 2009, Barack Obama released the nation from its self-inflicted bondage to a politics distorted by race. But what will happen during the next four years? Will there be enduring consequences beyond a day of stirring symbolism?

Obama's election does not demonstrate a clear ideological shift in the electorate. The proportion of liberals, moderates, and conservatives among voters in the 2008 election changed only marginally, and no large realignment was evident among social groups or regions. But the decisive results of the contest do present a warrant for change, providing the opportunity—although not the certainty—of a "reconstructive" presidency that will change the course of American politics.[41]

Mandates are usually created not by the voters but by the leaders they have chosen. Like Obama, FDR was elected to his first term on a vague platform. The content of his pledge of a New Deal came during his first administration and then was approved after the fact in the Democratic president's reelection. Another transformative leader, Ronald Reagan, barely achieved an initial popular vote majority for his conservative revolution, yet he also won sweeping retrospective approval in his second-term candidacy.[42]

Obama's initial mandate was a call from the voters for change from the Bush administration, which incurred a severe rebuke. In a general indicator of public attitudes, voters (by a 51 percent to 43 percent margin) endorsed the view that government should "do more to solve problems" rather than thinking that it is "doing too much." More specifically, voters do want government to take major actions to remedy the economic crisis, do favor extended health

care coverage, and do insist on an end to the U.S. military involvement in Iraq. To advance that imposing agenda, Obama can legitimately invoke the power of the public will. To go further, he must rely on his party's majorities in Congress, his skills of persuasion,[43] and the mobilization of a new national will.

If successful in his agenda, Obama has the potential to create a new Democratic majority coalition, building on his impressive victory in 2008. The party has a wider geographical base now, reaching into the West and some of the South. The Democrats have broadened their reach, not only in presidential contests, but also in House districts. By 2008, they had won the congressional seats of a third of the districts carried by Bush four years earlier, and they controlled virtually all of those won by Kerry.[44]

The demographic foundation of a new party majority also has been laid. The groups that voted for Obama will likely grow in relative size in future years, including blacks, Latinos, the college-educated, secularists, and metropolitan residents.[45] Republican prospects are less bright, since McCain gained votes only in declining segments of the electorate—small-town residents, veterans, and those with less education. Inevitably, too, those who are now young and lean more Democratic will replace aging Republicans. Such generational change, when energized by political leaders, has often been the basis for fundamental partisan realignment.[46]

The Democratic majority, if it is built and built well, will rely on a different philosophy, "a new liberal order." Just as FDR brought order to undisciplined capitalism in the 1930s, and Nixon and Reagan sought social order out of the turbulent 1960s and their aftermath, Obama and the Democrats may be able to create a new stability. As Peter Beinart insightfully writes:

> The public mood on economics today is a lot like the public mood on culture 40 years ago: Americans want government to impose law and order—to keep their 401(k)s from going down, to keep their health-care premiums from going up, to keep their jobs from going overseas—and they don't much care whose heads Washington has to bash to do it.[47]

Attempting to accomplish that goal, President Obama is likely to employ pragmatic means toward progressive ends.

For now, American politics will seem familiar, as the new president copes with old and mounting problems. But one difference makes the 2008 election incomparable and brilliant. At last, the country has truly accepted its founding premise, the "self-evident truth" that "all men are created equal." That is cause enough for a celebration of American democracy.

Notes

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1. Alan Abramowitz, using data from the end of June, predicted Obama would get 54.3 percent of the two-party vote, very close to the actual results. He relied on the three factors listed in this paragraph: the time in office, presidential approval ratings, and economic conditions. See "Forecasting the 2008 Presidential Election with the Time-for-Change Model," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 41 (October 2008): 691–696.
2. Of ten papers presented at the annual meetings of the American Political Science Association, only one predicted a Republican victory, and that prediction was later amended: "Symposium: Forecasting the 2008 National Elections," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 41 (October 2008): 679–728.
3. Finding that "one-third of white Democrats harbor negative views toward blacks" in a study conducted at Stanford University, reporters rushed to conclude that these "deep-seated racial misgivings could cost Barack Obama the White House if the election is close," Ron Fournier and Trevor Tompson, "Poll: Racial Views Steer Some White Dems Away from Obama," September 22, 2008, www.news.yahoo.com/page/election-2008. Although the AP-Yahoo! News Poll was conducted in nine waves throughout the election, these questions were not repeated. The surveys did, however, indicate that Obama was not in fact permanently damaged. The proportion of voters who eventually were "very favorable" in their evaluations (33 percent) and who intended to vote for him (51 percent) had tripled over the course of the campaign. See "The Associated Press/Yahoo Poll, Wave 9," October 28, 2008, www.knowledgenetworks.com.
4. Thomas Shaller, *Whistling Past Dixie: How Democrats Can Win without the South* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006).
5. Sergio Bendixen, a Hispanic adviser to Sen. Hillary Clinton, analyzing the coming vote in Democratic primaries in February, said, "The Hispanic voter—and I want to say this very carefully—has not shown a lot of willingness or affinity to support black candidates." Ryan Lizza, "Minority Report," *New Yorker,* January 21, 2008, www.newyorker.com.
6. Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas?* (New York: Holt, 2004).
7. See chapters 1 and 4 in the previous volume in this series, *The Elections of 2004,* ed. Michael Nelson (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2005).
8. In 1952, both parties had new nominees, Republican Dwight Eisenhower and Democrat Adlai Stevenson. However, incumbent vice president Alben Barkley had sought the Democratic presidential nomination. The previous election without any incumbent aspirant had been 1928.
9. For discussion of the absence of a mandate in 2004, see Marc D. Weiner and Gerald M. Pomper, "The 2.4% Solution: What Makes a Mandate?" *The Forum* 4 (2006): 2.
10. Michael McDonald of George Mason University provides the best source on early voting, as well as other aspects of American elections, through the United States Election Project, www.elections.gmu.edu.
11. Curtis Gans, "Much-hyped Turnout Record Fails to Materialize," American University, Center for the Study of the American Electorate, November 6, 2008.
12. "Trends in Political Values and Core Attitudes: 1987–2007" (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2007), 2.
13. All states other than Nebraska and Maine cast all of their electoral votes for the candidate who leads the popular vote in the entire state. These two states cast one vote for the winner in each congressional district, and two for the statewide leader. In 2008 Obama led in the Second Congressional District (Omaha), earning one of Nebraska's five electoral votes.
14. The correlation of the Democratic votes in 2004 and 2008 is very high, .92, excluding the outlying Democratic vote of the District of Columbia.
15. The standard deviation of the 2008 Democratic vote percentage was 9.58, a sharp rise from 8.50 in 2004.

16. The median shift was 5 percentage points toward the Democrats.
17. "For Much of the Country, A Sizeable Shift," *New York Times,* November 6, 2008, P11; November 11, 2008, A20.
18. Ethan Porter, "Rashid Who? Why the Jews Finally Came Home to Obama," *New Republic,* October 31, 2008.
19. In 2004, young voters were 17 percent of the total Kerry vote of 59 million, and gave him 54 percent, which resulted in a Democratic vote of 5.4 million from this group (.17 × 59 × .54). In 2008, young voters were 18 percent of the total Obama vote of 69 million, and gave him 66 percent, resulting in a Democratic vote of 8.2 million (.18 × 69 × .66).
20. A particularly significant impact came in the battleground state of Ohio. There, an early but incomplete analysis found that white turnout decreased by 538,000 (–11 percent). But black voting rose by 66,000 (+12.8 percent), and Latino voting by 39,000 (+22.7 percent). Turnout changes alone gave Obama an Ohio margin of 207,000: Greg Gordon, "More Minorities Voted this Year, but White Turnout Dropped," November 18, 2008, www.mcclatchydc.com.
21. Ruy Teixeira, "Digging into the 2008 Exit Polls," November 11, 2008, takingnote.tcf.org.
22. Chuck Todd et al., "First Thoughts," November 11, 2008, www.firstread.msnbc.msn.com.
23. The "effect" was named for Los Angeles mayor Tom Bradley, an African American, who lost a contest for governor of California in 1982, although some polls had shown him with a strong lead. See the conclusive refutation of the Republican pollster in this contest: V. Lance Tarrance, "The Bradley Effect—Selective Memory," October 13, 2008, www.realclearpolitics.com. After the elections, the spurious effect was consensually buried: Kate Zernike and Dalia Sussman, "For Pollsters, the Racial Effect that Wasn't," *New York Times,* November 6, 2008, A8.
24. Obama won 17,966,000 votes in all states and D.C., including caucus states and the "uncommitted" slate in Michigan, while Clinton won 17,770,000, an Obama majority of the two-candidate vote of 50.3 percent. Including territories not eligible to participate in the presidential election, Obama won 18,106,000 and Clinton 18,043,000, for a thin Obama edge with 50.1 percent. For full details, see the compilations on www.realclearpolitics.com.
25. Todd Gitlin, "Race for President Builds Characters," September 28, 2008, www.latimes.com.
26. Jane Mayer, "The Insiders," October 27, 2008, www.newyorker.com.
27. CBS News Poll, March 15–18, 2008.
28. Presidential debate transcript, www.latimesblogs.latimes.com/washington/2008/10/debate-transcri.html.
29. Adam Nagourney, "In Debating McCain, Obama's Real Opponent Was Voter Doubt," *New York Times,* October 5, 2008, A21.
30. Stanley Greenberg, the pollster who originated the category, in "Goodbye, Reagan Democrats," *New York Times,* November 11, 2008, A29.
31. Voters felt better (36 percent) rather than worse (12 percent) about Obama, while McCain drew fewer favorable (20 percent) than critical (26 percent) evaluations. See *Washington Post*-ABC News Poll, October 19, 2008, www.washingtonpost.com.
32. CBS News/*New York Times* poll, October 20, 2008. This poll re-interviewed respondents to its pre-debate survey. Obama went from a 5 percent lead on September 25 to a 13 percent margin on October 17–19. On the ability to handle a crisis, McCain previously had held a 53 percent to 44 percent advantage; after the debates, Obama held a 52 percent to 45 percent edge.
33. Illuminating accounts of the campaigns include Ryan Lizza, "Battle Plans" and David Grann, "The Fall," *New Yorker,* November 17, 2008, 46–66; and Adam Nagourney et al., "Near-Flawless Run From Start to Finish Is Credited in Victory," *New York Times,* November 5, 2008, A1.

34. John Judis, "Death Defying," *New Republic,* October 22, 2008.
35. Frank Rich, "It Still Felt Good the Morning After," *New York Times,* November 9, 2008, WK9.
36. In exit polls, 28 percent reported contact by the Obama campaign, 18 percent by the McCain campaign. The parties' own claims were 68 million contacts by the Democrats and 30 million (including ineffective robocalls) by the Republicans: Marc Ambinder, "Data that Helps Explain the Election," November 7, 2008, www.marcambinder.theatlantic.com.
37. However, many individuals made repeated small donations, so that the median contributor gave total contributions in the middle range, $201–$999. See "Reality Check," Campaign Finance Institute, November 24, 2008.
38. Jose Antonio Vargas, "Obama Raised Half a Billion Online," November 20, 2008, www.voices.washingtonpost.com/the-trail.
39. Adam Nagourney, "Change for Politics as We Know It," *New York Times,* November 4, 2008, A1.
40. Dick Meyer aptly undermines "5 Myths about Value Voters," *Washington Post,* October 26, 2008, B03.
41. Stephen Skowronek, *The Politics Presidents Make* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997).
42. The meanings of an electoral mandate are skillfully presented in Stanley Kelley Jr., *Interpreting Elections* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983). The construction of Reagan's presumed mandate is analyzed well by Marjorie Hershey, "The Meaning of a Mandate," *Polity* 28 (Winter 1995): 225–254.
43. In his classic analysis, *Presidential Power* (New York: Wiley, 1960), chap. 3, Richard Neustadt emphasizes the central importance of the president's "power to persuade."
44. Ronald Brownstein, "The Bush GOP's Fatal Contraction," November 22, 2008, www.nationaljournal.com/njmagazine.
45. These trends were foreseen by John Judis and Ruy Teixeira, *The Emerging Democratic Majority* (New York: Scribner, 2002). Their analysis is updated in "Back to the Future," *American Prospect* 18 (July–August 2007): 12–18.
46. See Warren Miller and Merrill Shanks, *The New American Voter* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996).
47. Peter Beinart, "The New Liberal Order," November 13, 2008, www.time.com/time.